

SETTLEMENT AGREEMENT
BETWEEN
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
AND
NATIONAL BOARD OF MEDICAL EXAMINERS

DJ# 202-16-181

[Press Release](#)

This Agreement is entered into by and between the United States of America, acting through the United States Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, Disability Rights Section (the “United States”), and the National Board of Medical Examiners (“NBME”).

BACKGROUND AND APPLICABLE LAW

1. NBME is a private, non-profit organization. Its offices and principal place of business are located in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
2. Together with the Federation of State Medical Boards, NBME sponsors the United States Medical Licensing Examination (“USMLE”), an examination related to licensing for professional purposes. NBME administers the USMLE. Thus, NBME is subject to the requirements of Section 309 of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (“ADA”), 42 U.S.C. § 12189, and the implementing regulations, 28 C.F.R. § 36.309.
3. The USMLE is a standardized examination used to evaluate applicants’ competence for purposes of medical licensure in the U.S. and its territories. The USMLE is designed to assess a physician’s ability to apply knowledge, concepts, and principles, and to demonstrate fundamental patient-centered skills, that constitute the basis of safe and effective patient care. The USMLE is administered at locations around the world to individuals who are attending, or have attended, medical schools in the United States and abroad. State medical boards rely upon successful completion of the three USMLE component exams, or “Steps,” as an important element in the process for licensing physicians.
4. The United States Department of Justice (the “Department”) is the federal agency responsible for administering and enforcing Title III of the ADA, 42 U.S.C. §§ 12181-12189.
5. Pursuant to Title III of the ADA, private entities that administer examinations related to professional licensing must offer the examinations in a place and manner accessible to persons with disabilities. 42 U.S.C. §12189 and 28 C.F.R. § 36.309.
6. Pursuant to 28 C.F.R. § 36.309, private entities that administer such examinations are required to provide reasonable modifications to the examination and appropriate auxiliary aids and services (i.e., testing accommodations) for persons with disabilities. The purpose of testing

accommodations is to ensure, in a reasonable manner, that the “examination results accurately reflect the individual’s aptitude or achievement level or whatever other factor the examination purports to measure, rather than reflecting the individual’s impaired sensory, manual or speaking skills (except where those skills are the factors that the examination purports to measure).” 28 C.F.R. § 36.309(b)(1)(i). “Required modifications to an examination may include changes in the length of time permitted for completion of the examination.” 28 C.F.R. § 36.309(b)(2).

7. The auxiliary aid requirement is a flexible one. A testing entity can choose among various alternatives as long as the result is effective communication. Use of the most advanced technology is not required so long as effective communication is ensured. *See* 28 C.F.R. Part 36, App. B, at 727-728 (2010).
8. Pursuant to the Attorney General’s authority under 42 U.S.C. § 12188(b)(1)(A)(i) to conduct investigations of alleged violations of Title III of the ADA, the Department investigated a complaint from [redacted], alleging that the NBME had failed to grant him reasonable testing accommodations on the basis of a disability (dyslexia) for administrations of the USMLE Step 1 examination in 2008 and 2010. Among other things, the NBME had found that the supporting documentation submitted to NBME by [redacted] did not demonstrate that he is currently substantially limited in a major life activity as compared to most people, so as to be disabled within the meaning of the ADA, as amended.
9. The Department concluded that [redacted] had submitted sufficient documentation to demonstrate that he is a person with a disability within the meaning of the ADA, and that he was entitled to reasonable testing accommodations to take the USMLE. NBME disputes the Department’s conclusions and denies that it has violated the ADA in any way in its handling of Mr. [redacted]’s request for accommodations.
10. [redacted] has recently provided additional documentation to the NBME in support of his request for accommodations on the USMLE Step 1 examination relating to accommodations he received in undergraduate school, graduate school, and medical school.
11. NBME and the Department have reached agreement that it is in the parties’ best interests, and the Department believes it is in the public interest, to resolve this matter on mutually agreeable terms and have, therefore, agreed to enter into this Agreement.

WHEREFORE, the Department and NBME hereby agree and stipulate as follows:

AGREEMENT TERMS

A. General Obligations

12. NBME shall provide reasonable testing accommodations to persons with disabilities who seek to take the USMLE, in accordance with the requirements of 42 U.S.C. § 12189 and the implementing regulations, 28 C.F.R. § 36.309.
13. NBME’s requests for documentation shall be reasonable and limited to documentation that establishes (a) the existence of a physical or mental impairment; (b) whether the applicant’s impairment substantially limits one or more major life activities within the meaning of the ADA; and (c) whether and how the impairment limits the applicant’s ability to take the USMLE under standard conditions. *See* 28 C.F.R. Part 36, App. B, at 737 (2010).

14. NBME will carefully consider the recommendation of qualified professionals who have personally observed the applicant in a clinical setting and have determined -- in their clinical judgment and in accordance with generally accepted diagnostic criteria, as supported by reasonable documentation -- that the individual is substantially limited in one or more major life activities within the meaning of the ADA and needs the requested test accommodations in order to demonstrate his or her ability and achievement level.

15. NBME will carefully consider all evidence indicating whether an individual's ability to read is substantially limited within the meaning of the ADA, including the extent to which it is restricted as to the conditions, manner, or duration as compared to the reading ability of most people.

16. In determining whether to grant a request for testing modifications or accommodations for an individual who did not receive a diagnosis of a reading disability until later in his or her life, NBME shall consider bona fide, reasonably supported reasons for the late diagnosis as well as academic records and other objective evidence relating to the individual's reading ability.

17. NBME has a right to make a timely request for supplemental information if the information submitted by an applicant does not clearly establish the nature of the disability or the need for reasonable testing accommodations, and the request is consistent with the requirements of Paragraph 13. NBME also has the right to have the information submitted by or on behalf of an applicant reviewed by one or more qualified professionals of NBME's choosing at NBME's request and expense. NBME is not required to defer to the conclusions or recommendations of an applicant's supporting professional but it must provide an explanation for declining to accept those conclusions or recommendations.

18. NBME is not required to provide testing accommodations that would fundamentally alter what the USMLE is intended to test, jeopardize exam security, or in the case of auxiliary aids and services, result in an undue burden.

19. If it is not doing so already, NBME will comply with the following requirements of the implementing regulations set forth at 28 C.F.R. § 36.309(b)(1) once they become effective on March 15, 2011:

- (iv) Any request for documentation, if such documentation is required, [will be] reasonable and limited to the need for the modification, accommodation, or auxiliary aid or service requested.
- (v) When considering requests for modifications, accommodations, or auxiliary aids or services, the entity [will] give[] considerable weight to documentation of past modifications, accommodations, or auxiliary aids or services received in similar testing situations, as well as such modifications, accommodations, or related aids and services provided in response to an Individualized Education Program (IEP) provided under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or a plan describing services provided pursuant to section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended (often referred as a Section 504 Plan).
- (vi) The entity [will] respond[] in a timely manner to requests for modifications, accommodations, or aids to ensure equal opportunity for individuals with disabilities.

B. Testing Accommodations for [redacted]

20. NBME will grant [redacted] the accommodation of double the standard testing time and a separate testing area when he takes the Step 1 and Step 2 CK examinations. The testing for Step 1 and Step 2 CK shall be accomplished in accordance with a reasonable schedule. Actual testing

time shall not exceed eight (8) hours per day.

21. [redacted] will be subject to all standard requirements for registering to take the Step 1 and Step 2 CK examinations and scheduling his examinations.

22. Except for the accommodations provided herein, the USMLE Step 1 and Step 2 CK examinations will be administered to [redacted] under the same conditions as those afforded examinees who do not receive accommodations. [redacted]’s scores on the Step 1 and Step 2 CK examinations will be reported in the same manner as are scores of other examinees who receive accommodations on the USMLE.

C. Miscellaneous

23. Compliance Review and Enforcement. Throughout the term of this Agreement the Department may, at any time, review compliance with Paragraphs 20-22 of this Agreement by, among other things, arranging for meetings and discussions with NBME personnel, requesting copies of any documents related to compliance with this Agreement, or both. The United States may enforce this Agreement. If the Department believes that this Agreement or any portion of it has been violated, it will raise its concern(s) with the NBME and will attempt to resolve the concern(s) in good faith. The Department will give the NBME thirty calendar days from the date it notifies the NBME of any breach of this Agreement to cure that breach, prior to instituting any court action.

24. Disputes. If the Department and NBME are unable to reach a resolution of any issues covered by this Agreement, the Department may seek appropriate relief. Failure by the Department to enforce any provision or deadline of this Agreement shall not be construed as a waiver of its right to enforce other provisions or deadlines of this Agreement.

25. Entire Agreement. This Agreement constitutes the entire Agreement between the Department and NBME on the matters raised herein, and no other statement, promise, or agreement, either written or oral, made by the Department or NBME or their agents, that is not contained in this written Agreement shall be enforceable regarding the matters raised herein.

26. Agreement Binding on NBME. This Agreement shall be binding on the NBME, as well as the NBME’s officers, agents, and employees, and their successors in interest. The NBME shall have a duty to so notify all such successors in interest of the existence and terms of this Agreement.

27. No Admission. This Agreement is not an admission by NBME of any violation of the ADA or its implementing regulations.

28. Term of the Agreement. This Agreement shall remain in effect for three years from the effective date.

29. Severability. If any term of this Agreement is determined by any court to be unenforceable, the other terms of this Agreement shall nonetheless remain in full force and effect.

30. Public Document. This Agreement is a public document. A copy of this document, or any information contained herein, may be made available to any person. The Department and NBME shall provide a copy of this Agreement to any person or entity upon request.

31. Release. The Department will obtain a Release from [redacted] in the form attached as Exhibit A to this Agreement.

32. No Retaliation. The NBME agrees that it will not discriminate or retaliate against any person within the meaning of the requirements of 28 C.F.R. § 36.206.

33. Authorization of Signatories. The individuals signing this Agreement represent that they are authorized to bind the Department and NBME to this Agreement.

34. Effective Date. This Agreement shall be effective on the date it is signed by the last signatory.

FOR NBME:

FOR THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA:

By:

Dated: _____

By:

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Assistant Attorney General
SAMUEL R. BAGENSTOS
Principal Deputy Assistant Attorney General
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Dated: _____ 02/23/2011

[Cases & Matters by ADA Title Coverage](#) | [Legal Documents by Type & Date](#) | [ADA Home Page](#)

February 23, 2011